

A Review of *Quarry* Magazine

Q*uarry* magazine, edited by Steven Heighton, Melanie Dugan, and Carolyn Bond out of Kingston, Ontario, is published quarterly and has been in existence since 1952. Of course, such institutions often lose their breath along the way somewhere and survive as relics even as they continue to publish. However, the current editors seem interested in experimenting both with the form and content of the magazine. Also, they seek abroad for interesting work. The current issue ranges quite widely in quality and approach. This is an improvement, however, on many magazines that have the consistency of wet bread.

The current issues of *Quarry* do not cultivate the sort of experimental (often exciting) work to be found in *Rampike* (Toronto) or the interesting criticism and consistently urban fiction and poetry in *What?* (Toronto) and *sub-TERRAIN* (Vancouver) or the language-based writing in *WRITING* (Vancouver). However, I suspect that they would not shy away from such material as many magazines do. They are not on automatic pilot. They are neither determinedly avant garde nor satisfied with contemporary Canadiana. They seem to be willing to take some risks towards a capacious magazine. What such a magazine lacks in clear definition it makes up for in wide vision.

Their most recent issue is Number 2 from Volume 42, 1993. It features fiction by Shusako Endo, Elisabeth Harvor, and Barbara Mailloux, poetry by Don Coles, Lynn Crosbie, Carl Grindley, Clive Thompson, and Jan Conn, letters between Erin Mouré and Bronwen Wallace, a photo essay by Jack Chiang, a review by Colin Morton, and a critical essay by Michael Mirolla.



The first piece in the magazine is called “The Final Martyrs”, translated by Van C. Gessel and written by Japan’s celebrated novelist Shusako Endo. It is a story/historical account of the persecution of Catholics in Japan during the nineteenth century. Endo himself is a Japanese Catholic and has written at least one novel (called *Silence*) on the persecutions in the seventeenth century.

“The Final Martyrs” were from a village called Nakano in the Urugami district not far from Nagasaki. The account concerns the 1867-1873 “fourth persecution” of Christians in the area. Previous “raids” occurred in 1790, 1842, and 1859. We read in a footnote that “During this fourth raid... over a hundred were jailed, sixty of whom died from torture and exposure.” Although Endo attempts to include a story in this work, it is primarily a catalogue of miseries describing the tortures of men, women, and children, the resulting loss of faith of some, and the transformed spiritual strength of others.

The story involves Kisuke, the village coward. Early on in the raids Kisuke “topples,” renounces his faith, and disappears to Nagasaki where he abandons himself to “*sake* and evil activities.” He does, however, eventually return to the place of imprisonment, having heard “a voice calling to him from behind” that told him “All you have to do is go and be with the others. If you’re tortured again and you become afraid, it’s all right to run away. It’s all right to betray me. But go follow the others.” Upon his return and the recounting of his story, those who have not “toppled” take heart and one, Kanzaburō, “felt that the tortures he had endured these two years, and the fact that his brother had

died without abandoning the faith, had not been in vain” even as he says, in the last sentence of the piece, “Kisuke. If it hurts you, it’s all right to apostatize. It’s all right. The Lord Jesus is pleased just because you came here. He is pleased.”

The writing is a curious mixture of historical account, Japanese parabolic brevity, and mournful, preoccupied, and somewhat diffuse lingering over a catalogue of miseries. It may be that Endo understandably experienced turmoil at the idea of eliciting an aesthetic response to this calamity. Yet he chose to enframe the writing within a story-like narrative. “The Final Martyrs” reads like an initial sketch of a work in which neither the author’s imagination nor his historical scholarship is fully engaged. He seems torn between his sense of duty to tell the world of this tragic oppression in a factual manner and his gifts as an imaginative writer. Also, I felt in the piece a heavy, despondent grief in which, perhaps, Endo struggles for his own faith. In the midst of a society where he may feel isolation and antipathy.

On seeking some answers to these questions, I find that “The Final Martyrs” is the first story in a collection of stories by the same name recently published by Peter Owen Publishers in England. Most of these stories are set in contemporary Japan, and upon reading some of them it becomes clear that the first story operates as a kind of historical context for the other stories. In “The Last Supper,” for instance, a psychiatrist relates his encounter with and subsequent treatment of Mr. Tsukada, a Japanese man near death from cirrhosis of the liver. The World War II veteran had to resort, during the war, to eating the flesh of his comrade to survive and had been tortured by this memory since.

It may be that Japanese culture does not offer much possibility for someone to redeem themselves in their own eyes in such case. One thinks of Kisuke, the coward from “The Final Martyrs.” As in that story, so in “The Last Supper” the redemption occurs within the context of Christianity: Mr. Tsukada’s death-bed confession happens in the presence of a Westerner, Echeñique, who has undergone similar guilt as a result of having had to survive a plane crash in the Andes. In his case, an alcoholic priest who was dying met his end bravely, even jokingly, and told the others to eat his body to survive. “Fortunately,” he told them, “thanks to the Lord, my body has more flesh on it than the cows at the foot of the Andes. But if you eat too much in one sitting, you’ll get drunk. I’ve got a thirteen-year supply of alcohol inside me.” Nonetheless, Echeñique has undergone trauma similar to Tsukada’s and it is only from their sharing of this experience that both are relieved, somewhat, of their burden of guilt.

Among other things, the story gives us some indication of why Christianity has not disappeared from Japan since it was introduced by Francis Xavier in 1549. It offers some relief, for instance, from the rigid and potentially destructive ideals of honour that bedevilled Mr. Tsukada.

The inclusion of “The Final Martyrs” in *Quarry*, then, will serve as an introduction to Endo’s work, an interesting writer whose territory is situated at a meeting point of East and West.



Elisabeth Harvor’s story “After All” is animated with a certain sunny perseverance through Caitlin’s trials and tribulations in her new city Montreal. Even when she is alone on Christmas she finds her way:

On Christmas Day there was a bad blizzard, the whole island of Montreal was snowed in... Caitlin baked a cookie sheet of gingerbread men and then she roasted a chicken leg and two potatoes—one sweet, one white—for her Christmas supper. After she'd made her gingerbread men last for as long as she could and sipped up all her tea, she poked some broken-off bits of spruce bough into the oven, then added the peelings from two oranges and turned the heat down low and soon the whole apartment was smelling of balsam with a tang of urine in it, but for some weird reason this was not unpleasing, maybe because it was also mixed up with the bitter Christmassy fragrance of the burnt orange peel. She was no longer lonely. After all, how could she envy the people who were out and about, decked out in their handsomest glitter? Out gallivanting? Nobody could gallivant! The realization filled her with an intense, un-Christian pleasure.

The attentive and evocative detail, the slight “tang of urine” together with the “Christmassy fragrance,” the homely and humorous poking of “broken-off bits of spruce bough” and the sipping up all of her tea—and finally her “intense, un-Christian pleasure”—give this passage a charm and strength that's typical of the rest of the thirty-nine page story.

It takes some doing to write with such sunny perseverance. Many would write an angrier story. Anger at her rich boss Audrey, for instance. But Caitlin is not so naive to have trusted her in the first place. So no trust betrayed.

Her take on Thomas Mann is wryly humorous. Mann being so influential, an Audrey of sorts, obsessed with his own constipation in his diaries. Caitlin trying to laugh her way through ‘mere’ poverty and loneliness (as opposed to the sententious profundities that afflict Mann's characters), wishing she could call up her friend Joyce, as Caitlin reads Mann's diaries, and tell her that she's obsessed with Mann's obsession with his constipation.

Caitlin's “dream of a better life” does, among other things, involve some more money. She plugs away, and hey, true to the sunny perseverance she and (maybe) Harvor has, she gets a raise and *maybe* even a man in the offing. Classical comedies end with marriages. Maybe modern comedies end with a raise and just *maybe* a relationship in the offing. To the boss, no less. A moderately happy ending. To some extent, I suppose, an intelligent *romance*, a real-life angsty, lonely, real-live middle class romance. Long on the longing and short on the delivery of the romance. A revisitation of the Canadian or American dream (hard to tell the difference) at a point when the romance has paled a bit and the dream has become more or less preoccupied with fighting off the rats that steal through the story at various points and in various forms.

To call the story a romance, though, is misleading because of the usual meaning applied to the term. The ‘love interest’ is introduced without overemphasis in the story and the possibility of a relationship is merely that—a possibility—when the story ends. What is enduring about the story is the portrait of Caitlin and the skill of Harvor's writing. Large portions of the narrative are devoted to scenes where Caitlin is either alone (as in the above long quotation) or dealing with the conflicts that arise between neighbours in a small place. The ‘plot’ is quite secondary and merely involves Caitlin's adjustments to living in a new city. And she does not change very much over the course of the story. But we come to know her extraordinarily well, it seems, and share her testy romance with day-to-day living.

Caitlin is afflicted with occasional envy, “un-Christian pleasures,” and may say to herself “Oh lord I beg of you, don’t let me end up all alone.”

This would be what she would be afraid of saying to Joyce, if she should decide to splurge and phone her in England.

She is not a passionate intellectual, has little education (though is rarely anybody’s fool), and her goals in life are not exactly visionary. But she does cope both with her loneliness and with her poverty and, by implication, observes the world with enduring attention and humour. So she is not incredibly unusual and is, to a large extent, Miss Normal. An upbeat, contemporary, urban, and more materialistic Margaret Laurenceish character?

Strong but typical Canadiana? Dated and doomed? Where conflicts arise in the story, they are often class conflicts between rich and poor and, on the other hand, poor and poor living at close quarters. Or, perhaps more typically, between Caitlin’s expectations or hopes at age thirty-nine and her reality, she being a part of the ‘disappearing’ middle class—like many readers of *Quarry* and other literary magazines, no doubt. So the story *is* contemporary Canadiana in that regard.

Harvor’s particular feminism seems testy and frustrated with theory and both behind and ahead of writers like Erin Mouré. Behind because her celebration of Miss Normal is a reiteration, however fine and strong, of the literary past. But she has already grasped her own power, whereas Mouré is forever trying to answer the question of why she can’t find it. To give Mouré her due, part of the reason may be the ambitious magnitude of her aspirations. Time will tell. My impression is that Harvor would appreciate the correspondence between Mouré and Bronwen Wallace included in this issue of *Quarry*. And that Harvor would find Bronwen Wallace’s position close to her own heart.

It was interesting to note that Caitlin’s problems with her boss were with a woman, not a man. It seems that we’re well into a transition toward an androgyny where both the personal appearance and the social roles that men and women may assume become indistinguishable. Yet another middle-classm bites the dust. Presumably that’s good for women, but you look at Caitlin’s situation and wonder what it’s done for her in “*oob-la-la Moor-ee -Al!*” Well presumably, when she leaves her job for the new one she finally gets the “exquisitely subtle hand-blocked silk scarves and Indonesian money-belts and handmade dull-silver earrings... their throwaway chic, their pinks to die for” and doubled pay and “six times the work”. I don’t know—good luck, Caitlin!



After reading Harvor’s story I read the letters between Bronwen Wallace and Erin Mouré. The first thing that came to mind was the part of Harvor’s story where Michael and Caitlin are talking about po-mo architecture. I suppose that’s part of Harvor’s take on theory:

And then he told her about a time when he’d worked in a small office where everyone was very heavily into theory. “So heavily into theory that we didn’t actually draw, we talked...”

The four letters between Wallace and Mouré, dated between December 1985 and March 1986, were extracted by Susan McMaster from a correspondence that runs to a hundred pages between 1985 and 1987. We read a vigorous and often moving debate between the two friends about feminist

theory and its place in their writing. To read Bronwen Wallace's letters is to realize that her death in 1989 at the age of forty-four was a loss to the Canadian intelligentsia. The following quotation from one of Wallace's letters indicates something of the nature and vigour of their discussion:

What really angers and hurts me (and this may be what I identify as dogma) is the feeling I've had, both from your letters and from our conversation, that questioning deconstructionism etc. means lack of openness, Anglo-Saxon mistrust of theory, lack of solidarity, etc. You *say* that this is an open discussion, but the parameters of it *remain* within deconstructionist theory.

This tells me about their friendship, a depth that involves seeking the truth together. These letters are, among other things, an indication of the nature of their friendship, and my sympathy goes out to Erin in having lost such a close friend:

What I need you to understand, my dear, important friend, is that I am with you. I may not be able to do what you will do with language, partly because I don't want to, but partly because, Erin, I can't and that's that for whatever reason. Of course all of this is going to influence my work, though I fear it may not do so as much as it will yours. (In all that I said about myself in the preceding paragraph, there is the dark side, which is the recognition that I survived in part [by] cutting off parts of my imagination which I may not be able to retrieve.) Yet what I mainly feel is that I must write from the strengths I know and trust within myself... (p.40)

What would Mouré and Wallace have to say about Harvor's story? Perhaps Wallace might laugh and Mouré would at least initially theorize it quite away as the product of a woman who has failed to understand the "dominant order." I would be wrong here, no doubt, and Erin would instead articulate a far more complex and reflective position. And then it would be Harvor's turn to laugh or offer alternatives.

After I read the following from one of Erin's letters, I stopped to consider her remark in relation to my own experience of language.

The revelation (to me, anyhow...common knowledge to many other people) that *language itself subordinates the feminine*, astounded me. Suddenly I have been able to touch huge unspoken blindnesses in me that are the places where language is not working. And I always thought those spaces were my own blackness, the dark night of the soul, these things. (p.35)

It may be true, as Mouré says, that "*language itself subordinates the feminine*." That particular problem is not mine, however, though I share in the consequences. We are all within the empire and inherit a wounded tongue. The epigraph to one of Amabile's books, *The Presence of Fire*, comes to mind: "Whoever spits the pain from their throat/ is beginning to love the flame in their hands." The language to which we are subject most of the time is mad with ownership, winning and losing, simple dualities, the rule of law, the salesman's conveniences, and, as Orwell says, "the defence of the indefensible."

I wonder what she specifically has in mind in asserting that "language itself subordinates the feminine"? There is a grammatical meaning she has in mind, surely, among other meanings. Do the

feminine and masculine, as terms from grammar, tell us anything about the relations of men and women or about the social roles men and women assume? I look in the Oxford English Dictionary for the definition of the grammatical term ‘feminine’:

Of the gender to which appellations of females belong. Of a termination: Proper to this gender. Of a connected sentence: Consisting of words of this gender.

What little I can understand of the O.E.D., not being a grammarian, leads me to believe that her point is more accurately stated as ‘language itself *mutes* the feminine.’ For instance, I read in the O.E.D. that a “feminine rime” in French versification is “one ending in a mute e... hence in wider sense, a rime of two syllables of which the second is unstressed.” An infamous passage from 1 Corinthians comes to mind:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

Why not say ‘keep silent’ rather than “keep silence”? As though it were something to keep. Like ‘they are the keepers of silence’. Is that how “the feminine” works grammatically? The keeper of silence? Certainly, then, the muting of ‘the feminine’ coincides with a “subordination” of women.

One of the differences I note between Mouré’s letters and Wallace’s is that Mouré is constantly pointing to and referring to a body of theory, defending its importance and relevance to her, whereas Wallace’s remarks always originate at home, however far they may travel thereafter. Wallace is always bringing her generalizations home. They start there and end there but travel far between times. And so they are much more resonant than Mouré’s. Mouré’s letters are not often in themselves fascinating, but only in relation to Bronwen’s remarks and possibly in relation to ‘theory.’ But the editor of the letters has only been able to include a small selection of letters, seventeen pages from a correspondence that runs to a hundred pages. Presumably this is not Mouré’s typical *modus operandi*. Though it would make sense that Mouré should see the significance of her own work as residing with more dependence upon a community of writing than Wallace may have.

After Erin sends Bronwen the first of the included letters, together with several articles on feminist theory, Bronwen responds with a tremendous “personal history” of her own feminism. Truly an amazing letter, and an intense summary of her own evolution. Erin then responds rather defensively, beginning her letter by saying “The personal/political history in your letter was very moving; when I reached your points, I was disappointed that you didn’t talk about any of the articles I sent.” Wallace would have found this frustrating, no doubt, and her first point in her next letter is that “My personal history *was* in part my reaction to the articles.”

Wallace goes on to criticize what she perceives as some of the mistakes of the current rhetoric. For instance, she quotes from one of Mouré’s letters: “And think too about WHY IT IS that women can only speak for themselves and not the universal. WE’re outside of discourse altogether, the other, the Beloved, the projection...is why.” Wallace answers Mouré by saying “What I’ve been trying to say in all my discussions is that I don’t accept that first premise. I think it’s an insult to women and ahistorical to boot.”

Still, she is not blind to troubles, though she maintains that “The patriarchy is not a goddamn

monolith!” and toward the end of the letter she says:

I mention these things to get them out in the open, between you and me, as among women. We all share our oppression, the horrible things that have been done to us in the name of the dominant order. We share the absolute necessity of changing the future. And the present. But we carry with us our pasts, from which we cannot escape, and our individual experience, which alone can be our starting point...

...I believe that gentleness is in the hands, regardless of gender.

Which goes some distance toward clarifying why she so adamantly insisted to Erin that “My personal history *was* in part my reaction to the articles.” She took the time and thought to respond in her own way, with her own priorities and perspectives rather than merely responding in a way that mimicked the language and concerns of the articles. In part she was redefining the problems. And Erin, concerned as she is with language, could not see outside of that circle to her friend’s approach. But perhaps she did later on, in further letters. Their friendship was not superficial.



Caitlin, in Harvor’s story, reads *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann’s influential novella concerned with (how would you end this sentence?) sexual repression and obsession with an image of youth. *Quarry* includes a poem by Don Coles called “Aschenbach in Venice.” Part of the reason why Mann’s book is as famous as it is because of the compassionate way he sketches a sad sickness in our ideals of love, in part the consequence of our repression of sexuality together with our deranged worship of youth. Aschenbach, the protagonist of the work, becomes politely obsessed with a young boy during his final holiday in Venice. Regardless of his derangement, it really is love that Aschenbach is struggling with and the confusions he has inherited and acquired in part by being an artist.

Coles’s poem, on the other hand, is rather comically jaded. It sketches a scene involving an English professor and student fucking in the office. These things happen naturally enough, but in Coles’s poem the professor or the speaker cynically mocks his student-lover even as he sourly lusts over her.

...and still the little subdued slap
of the Adriatic waves mingled

with the air-conditioning
so that even on the office couch, or
a few times held by her small buttocks
on the desk’s edge

when love was filling her
she would see what *he* had seen,
a kind of god, a stunning boy
on whom the sun paused...

why, she can hardly wait,
this is why she’s here,

this is not Venice and
not exactly an aloof genius
either, but it's the closest
she can get to

things so new
she could spend her whole life
understanding them...

Presumably the speaker or the professor realizes that the professor is more or less a dead thing in the end as "he leans forward in his chair/ by the sea", having done his homework on the disease at the heart of *Death in Venice*. And so I wonder what Coles is saying about the university, for instance, that monolith of learning? Who knows, who cares? The parody is so leeringly convoluted that it is hardly worth considering. But regardless of what Coles intends, he has the grace (if that is the word) and intelligence not to spell it out and lets the readers draw their own conclusions.

The most generous interpretation of the poem is that it is a ruthless, parodic pathology of the professor, the student, the speaker, the teaching of literature, and our continuing obsession with a notion of love that often trivializes our writing to the point where the rest of the world can only wonder at our priorities.



Lynn Crosbie's two poems join Coles's "Aschenbach in Venice" in the grotesque gallery of love that runs through *Quarry* 42 #2 also in the work of Stan Rogal and Barbara Mailloux. Crosbie's are, perhaps, the most noteworthy of these.

"Little Stabs At Happiness" begins with an epigraph from Alice Cooper's "Billion Dollar Babies" and is similarly campy in its first-person narrative from the point of view of a girl obsessed with her first lover/angel/doll, her "terrible" "angel", the "sly, ineffable" one. The girl describes the requisite torture of/torture by her unrequited passions and finally hears

...the sirens
in the distance, I hear:
abduction. a cruel word that
does not describe my *adoration*.
& I know I must divest him,
one last time, my dishabille.
& clean him with cotton & alcohol
& preserve him. each stroke, each
little stab at happiness will depress
him. he is the culture, the essence of the
medicine, the antidote I have
devised. to remedy the pain,
the violence of love...

There is a humour and acknowledgment of love and pain in these poems that coexists with the satire and the campy histrionics which seems to elevate the poems beyond being merely trapped within the

near psychotic phenomenon they describe. In “Jesus the Low Rider,” in which the speaker loves a Christly/biker “outlaw./ who talks about betrayal in his sleep...” the pathetic confusion of the speaker is comically evident, yet she says at the end:

I have learned to live with sorrow,
& I am a believer. Jesus kisses
me, hard on each cheek, before he
turns, & rides away.

Confused and deranged as these speakers are, there is a kind of humorous vitality and perspective written into the poems (possibly beyond that of the speakers) in which the absurdities and sad wastefulness of the speaker’s love is redeemed in a larger (religious) vision of love. Whereas in Coles’s poem, for instance, what remains is a vision of a kind of death-in-life and secular cultural collapse that is ongoing. The intrigue of Coles’s poem is whether the writer is trapped within the phenomenon he describes. Or whether he has a larger vision of love to offer.



Michael Mirolla’s essay is titled (in a style by now annoyingly clichéd) “*T*” of the Storm / “*T*” in the Storm: *Exploring Alternatives to First-Person Narration*. I don’t buy his line that first-person narrative has exhausted its possibilities. And I found his prose limp, as though he was munching potatoe chips and talking about narrative between innings, an indifferent graduate student so confused he thinks that it’s important that writing should allow us to be able to “objectively” determine where the speaker’s “existential alienation stops and society’s takes over” (p. 139). I didn’t detect any conviction in what he was saying.

He states early on the ‘problem’ with first-person narration: “If the first-person narrative is so good at getting across a subjective sense of alienation, how can it also present the objective fact of this alienation?” (p. 136) He feels that the limited perspective of first-person narration can easily impose on the writing a less than capacious vision which, further, does not allow us any reliable perspective on the character and the world written about other than the character’s own possibly unreliable perspective.

However, it is the writer’s limitation of vision, not the technique itself that can impose on first-person narration a less than capacious vision. There are many ways to limit a character’s perspective and yet write a larger one (e.g. ‘Of course they said *trains*—they didn’t say *brains*—and I wasn’t going anywhere.’). But even if such *techniques* are not used, we have *our own* perspective to sort things out as we can. We may not have any critical apparatus more reliable than our own shit detectors, but often these are up to the challenge and we make no bizarre, sophomoric demand on the writer to allow us to analyse the text neatly according to “what Marx calls the difference between self-alienation and economic alienation.” (p. 139)

In his final paragraph, he insists that:

the first-person narrative isn’t equipped to handle a world where the focus has shifted from individual self-examination to one of social re-integration. We’ve been treated to chest-beating—ad nauseam, it sometimes seems. What we are looking for now are explorations of possible healing states, of bridges built between the self and the Other. Those who wish

to continue to use the first-person narrative must adapt. (p. 141)

I suppose that it is mandatory for ‘critics’ to pose as though they have their finger on the pulse of the royal “we.” It may be the case that in academe “the focus has shifted from individual self-examination to one of social re-integration.” Certainly there is less self-examination than social integration going on *there*, typically. However, it is foolish to advise artists to themselves “re-integrate” to this institutionalized program where the individual’s perspective is passé and merely unreliable, not productive of the objective knowledge, wherever it may be, that Mirolla seems to advocate. What really bothers me about this piece is that it sounds quite familiar by now and is merely an example of the kind of academic, conformist, muddle-headed verbiage that passes for criticism these days.

The editors have taken an uninformed risk here. But it is an indication that they are willing to take risks—which by their nature are hit and miss. One hopes that they continue with the same spirit but with a more informed critical gauge.

Mirolla’s claim that “first-person narrative has technically run its course” is not only sloppily written, but is also mistaken. I note that John Ashbery, for instance, who’s doing some extraordinary writing, often works in first-person narrative. Perhaps Mirolla has not read him and instead reads writers like W.D. Valgardson. Valgardson being one of the three Canadian writers whose work he discusses (the other two are Marc Diamond and Margaret Atwood).